Baron HENNET de GOUTEL

Vergennes and the American Independence

VERGENNES AND WILSON

TRANSLATED BY L. ENSOR

WITH A PORTRAIT
OF
VERGENNES

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Charles Gravier Comte de Vergennes
Conseiller d'Etat Ordinaire,
Et Chef du Conseil
Ministre et Secrétaire d'Etat
Royal des Finances

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THE FOLLOWING PAGES WHICH LINK TOGETHER

THE GREAT FRENCH MINISTER

AND THE GREAT AMERICAN STATESMAN

ARE DEDICATED

TO

H. EXC. Mr WOODROW WILSON

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

VERGENNES AND WILSON

A hundred and forty years have elapsed since, on the 6th of February 1778, Louis XVI of his own deliberate will and that of his great Minister of Foreign Affairs, comte de Vergennes, laid the foundations of an alliance between France and the United States, which liberated the new world. And now that to-day the book reopens at the page turned down of yore, and that history repeats itself, the same hopes arise. Such a coincidence must necessarily strike all thinkers ; hence the manifestations celebrating the exploits of La Fayette, the generous ardour of Rochambeau's soldiers, the sailors of Amiral de Grasse, and of all those who came from all parts of the French provinces to shed their blood for the great cause of the Independence of the United States. Certainly it is right to evoke such noble reminiscences and the tribute rendered to these heroes can only strengthen the fraternal feeling that unites all French and American hearts.

Nevertheless, on one special but important point silence has been too long maintained ; in none of the official ceremonies that have taken

place in Paris has the name of the King Louis XVI or that of his Secretary of State, Vergennes, been mentioned. Only, one American, M. Walter Berry, president of the Chamber of Commerce, in his remarkable speech of the 4th of July 1917, at the Palais d'Orsay, recalled with eulogium the work of Vergennes, work which had been all important.

If La Fayette, Rochambeau and de Grasse were the instruments, the glorious instruments, which contributed to found American liberty, Louis XVI and Vergennes were the master minds, firm and vigilant, who determined and coordinated the movements of these instruments. Without them France could have given Washington but a moral though chivalrous support, and the scanty and therefore sterile assistance of a few volunteers ; thanks to the King and his Minister, the ancient French monarchy, with all its resources, its prestige, its glorious past, entered the arena, and by its powerful effort turned the scales towards right and justice. What would be thought if, in a hundred years hence, our descendants, commemorating the admirable assistance the United States are now offering France, were to pass in silence the name of President Wilson, who has decided everything, who has held in his hands the decision of peace or war ? Such an idea seems incomprehensible, we should consider it injudicious and lacking all equity. It is, however, the same case interesting in these circumstances with regard to

Louis XVI and Vergennes, we only wish in this simple, short, and loyal study to retrace in a few words the part they played and draw from their own declarations the principles they professed, in fact to show them speaking and acting, laying the basis, even at the end of the XVIII century of the traditional friendship which unites France and America.

Born on the 23rd August 1754, Louis XVI succeeded his grand-father, Louis XV, on the 10th May 1774. We are told that during the King's last agony the Dauphin and Dauphiness remained in a secluded chamber in the Palace of Versailles, when suddenly they heard a rolling sound like thunder re-echo through the galleries. It was the crowd of courtiers who, abandoning the apartment of the dead king, rushed to pay them homage. The Comtesse de Noailles, entering the first, saluted them as their « Majesties », whereupon Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette fell upon their knees and exclaimed : « Oh! my God! we are too young to reign ! Guide us, almighty God ! Protect our inexperience ! »

Louis XVI was not quite twenty. On the 16th May 1770 he had married the Archiduchess Marie-Antoinette of Austria, daughter of the Empress Marie-Thérèse ; she was a most charming princess, graceful, vivacious, witty, sprightly, with an oval face surrounded by a halo of fair hair, clear, laughing blue eyes, captivating by the majestic elegance of her movements and the dazzling freshness of her beauty. Louis XVI

did not possess such an attractive appearance. His features were regular but heavy and his short sight imparted a certain gravity to his aspect. Middle-sized, he already betrayed signs of precocious corpulence. In the midst of the court splendour, his dress was untidy, his manners abrupt, his bearing awkward. When the business of the State gave him leisure, avoiding society, his chief pleasure was either hunting in the neighboring forest, or shutting himself up in a workshop he had fitted up and working as a locksmith. Morally, Louis XVI possessed sterling qualities. He was thoroughly upright, had an accurate mind and generous heart, a love for the public welfare and purity of life, but, called to the throne at one of the most troubled periods in the history of France, he lacked the necessary initiative and energy requisite to dominate a difficult situation. Doubtless at any other time his reign would have been prosperous, and he would have deserved, like one of his predecessors, Louis XII, the surname of « Father of the People ». His misfortune was living at a time when simple virtues, real but ordinary talents did not suffice. It required genius and Louis XVI had only upright intentions and sincere good will. But, if in home politics his conduct was often vacillating and wanting in perspicacity, if he failed through weakness, want of resolution or inertia, as soon as the question of exterior affairs arose, his sense of things became singularly clear, his views

precise and sound. Like all the Bourbons, he had a very high notion of his own dignity and of the rôle which fell to the part of France amongst nations. To sustain this rôle, he knew how to choose a Cabinet Minister, upright and capable, to whom he gave his full confidence, listening to his counsels and defending him against all the attacks levelled at him. That is how M. de Vergennes, strong in the support of the King, which never failed him, was able to pursue the noble and disinterested task to which he devoted himself, and which gave to France the general esteem, and to the United States the official recognition of their independence and their liberty.

Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, was not an ordinary character : Commander of de King's Orders, Privy Councillor, Minister and Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, he was born at Dijon on 29th December 1719. He belonged to an old family of Burgundy who, from the thirteenth century, had most of them held judicial positions. His father was « Maître des Comptes » at Dijon, his mother, Marie-Françoise Chevignard de Charodon, daughter of a High Functionary of Finance in the same town, was related to M. de Chavigny, French Minister at the Portuguese Court. This latter circumstance decided the career de Charles de Vergennes, or rather the Chevalier de Vergennes, as he was then called. Educated in a religious establishment, he had finished his law studies and taken his degree when M. de Cha-

vigny, going to Lisbon at the end of 1779, took him there with him as « Conseiller d'ambassade ».

Vergennes, barely twenty years of age, could not be at a better school ; familiar with all the secrets of diplomacy, M. de Chavigny trained his nephew to all the ins and outs of that subtle science, which cannot be learned in a day and of which he was himself a master. Vergennes, active, hard-working, with his sagacious and astute mind, rapidly benefitted by the experience and tatents of his uncle. After two years spent in Portugal, he accompanied the latter to Frankfurt, where M. de Chavigny went as representative of Louis XV to the Emperor Charles VII. It was one of the most important posts of French diplomacy. Vergennes showed himself a very efficient help to his relative. After the death of Charles VII in 1745 de Chavigny and Vergennes returned to Lisbon.

A serious quarrel had arisen at that time between Spain and Portugal, and the two powers were about to come to blows over a litigation concerning their possessions in South America. The Portuguese had erected under the name of Colony of the « Saint Sacrement », a fortress on the left bank of the river La Plata. The Spaniards considering this construction as a menace for the town of Buenos-Ayres, situated just opposite, demanded its demolition. The Portuguese, on the other hand, complained of the erection of the citadel of Monte Video by the Spaniards. Already blood had been shed when Louis XV,

who was on good terms with both Courts, and wished to maintain peace, instructed his Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Marquis d'Argenson, to begin negociations for that purpose. D'Argenson, encumbered by numerous contradictory documents, which only obscured the matter, handed over the solution to M. de Chavigny, who passed it on to Vergennes. On the 30th March 1746, the latter sent the Minister a statement, which in four pages summed up the respective claims of the two opponents. D'Argenson, surprised at the clearness and simplicity of this work, wrote on the margin : « I have read with delight this most clear memorandum, by which I understood for the first time that it concerned what was not spoken of, and not at all what was spoken of ».

En 1749, Chavigny and Vergennes definitely left Lisbon. The former for the Embassy at Venice ; he presented his nephew to Louis XV in the following terms : « Sir, I have formed him and am proud of him, but instead of requiring my advice it is I who should require his, to serve your Majesty. It is time he began and I ended ».

This appeal was listened to, and at the end of July Vergennes was named plenipotentiary minister at Treves. There he soon gave the measure of his talents. He was already what we will find him in his Embassies in Turkey and in Sweden ; that is, the accomplished type of a diplomatist of the old school ; refined, moderate, courteous, seeing and noting everything, taking advantage of everything, never committing

himself, excelling in stimulating confidence and hiding under a smiling urbanity a mind perpetually alive and a most tenacious will.

His work at Treves led to important results (1). As a reward for his services the Chevalier de Vergennes was chosen January 6th 1755, to succeed Comte des Alleurs, French Ambassador at Constantinople, who had just died, Vergennes was then thirty-six years of age.

On his new scene, amid numberless difficulties and responsibilities, he showed himself one the most illustrious defenders of the traditional policy of the French Monarchy in the East (2). After he had spent fourteen years on the shores of the Bosphorous, the Duc de Choiseul, Louis XV's Minister of Foreign Affairs, recalled him to France.

For two years Vergennes lived far from the Court, in retirement, at his château de Toulongeon in Burgundy, devoting himself to his family and the duties of a country gentleman. Choiseul having fallen into disgrace, very shortly after, the Chevalier de Vergennes, or rather as he was now called the Comte de Vergennes, was named Ambassador to Sweden on the 21st March 1771. His task was to be similar to that which he accom-

(1) It would have been too long to give here the complete report of this work ; its details and the one of his struggle against the German diplomacy will be found in the French edition of *Vergennes et Wilson*.

(2) He tried to assist the unfortunate Poles, urging the Sultan to help them.

plished in Turkey, and he succeeded there as at Constantinople, again fighting against the oppressive politics of Catherine II, the German Empress of Russia. Suddenly, the news of the death of Louis XV, the accession of Louis XVI and the appointment of Vergennes as Minister of Foreign Affairs reached Stockholm. From this time, until his death in 1787 Vergennes became the supreme arbitrator of French interests abroad.

Before beginning the study of the most brilliant part of his career, it is necessary to examine the principles which in riably guided Vergennes ; more especially in connection with the United States of America. It is interesting to retrace the physical and mental portrait of M. de Vergennes. We possess several pictures or engravings of him ; some represent him in medaillon, profile or three-quarters, or full face. A painting by Callet (1), on the contrary, portrays him in rich surroundings, seated at his writing table, as if ready to dictate his luminous and profound memoranda, in which he summed up for the King, his master, the different aspects of the most intricate European questions. From these records, we gather he impression of a solemn gravity, indeed somewhat affected. Comte de Vergennes attained power at the age of fifty-four. He was tall, well-proportioned, slightly

(1) The portrait of the Minister is by Callet, from an engraving Kindly lent by the Municipal Library of Versailles and by the Marquis de Vergennes who possess the original.

inclined to corpulence; his sharp features, wide forehead, long nose, deep-set eyes under bushy eyebrows, thin lips but heavy jaw, all contributed to lend him a cold, correct and somewhat massive physionomy, which neither the powdered hair nor the silks and laces of his costume could entirely mitigate.

But it would be a great mistake to judge M. de Vergennes on his mere outward appearance; under this apparent coldness, was hid a proud and delicate mind, an affectionate heart, which he betrayed in his letters to M^me^ de Vergennes (published by M. de Mayer in 1789) (1). We no longer have the diplomatist expressing himself in measured, pompous terms; but the private individual, the husband, the father stand revealed, athirst for the quiet happiness of home life, which his foreign missions, his duties as Minister, give him little leisure to enjoy. « My dear », he writes to M^me^ de Vergennes from Sweden, « far from those we love, uncertainty is the greatest misfortune. I have often experienced this trial. If I have not told you how worried I am, it was in order to spare you. If the possession of my heart can give you happiness, you must be happy, for it is yours wholly, shared only as you permit by our children, who are the ties and objects of our love. Remember that affection dispels distance, between us it is not to be

(1) Mayer (de), *Public and private life of Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, minister of State.* Speech crowned by the Academy of Amiens on 25th August 1788. Paris, 1789.

feared ; I should love you at the other end of the world. When I have a moment free I devote it to you. it replaces the dissipations and frivolous amusements I have long ago discarded ; one only could interest me : society in which gentleness, frankness and confidence would reign, where both heart and mind would derive benefit, that is what I seek ». And a little further he adds : « I do not believe that anyone is curious to know what we talk about ; if there are any such, they must be edified by our respective sentiments ».

Hence M. de Vergennes, comparing his situation, however enviable, with the peaceful existence he would like, indulges in certain reflections. « The days, my dear, which are rapidly passing », he writes to his wife on 30th August 1774, « bring nearer the moment of our reunion, but also that of my destruction, each minute is a step towards old age ; such is the common lot of humanity, but it is less terrible when one's life has not been completely idle and useless. The life I lead will spare me that imputation ; as for usefulness, I have worked hard, time will show with what results..... Business grows up around me, and in spite of the rapidity I bestow on it, I almost fear to be crushed under the weight. I will not allude to all I think of the vanities of this world, by which so many are dazzled, and which to me appear so puerile. Let us trust in Providence who knows better than we do what suits us ». The following lines addressed to Mme de Vergennes

from Compiègne show the same impressions : « I shall at the earliest only see you Wednesday evening. Such are the privileges of my profession, but I must take them as they come..... Yesterday would have been delightful, had I spent it in the bosom of my family; as it was spent face to face with myself it was not very gay. I was only aroused by the sight of your letter and the children's and the nosegay you all sent me. Very many thanks, those are gifts of love which help to happiness ; but the season of flowers is long past for me ».

M. de Vergennes was above all a man of honor and scrupulous integrity. We may here quote M. Louis Bonneville de Marsangy who, in one of the books (1) in which he studies Vergennes embassy at Constantinople, declares : « Whether the goal to attain, the persons to set to work, or the means to employ, Vergennes showed the most legitimate scruples. In an Empire (the Ottoman) where everything is for sale, he was loathe to make use — beyond certain admissible limits — of the inducements of money or riches. His conscience became a severe judge; he did not hesitate to use encouragement and courtesy, but he stopped at corruption. As for himself he was impeccable and the smallest suspicion withered at his feet ». Louis XV's government

(1) Bonneville de Marsangy (Louis). *The Chevalier de Vergennes. His Embassy at Constantinople*, 2 vol. Paris, 1894. — By same author : *Comte de Vergennes. His Embassy in Sweden* (1771 to 1774), 1 vol. Paris, 1898.

had placed to his credit three millions of francs to further his intercourse with the Turkish ministers and provide for the expenses of an anti-Russian policy. On his return to Versailles, M. de Vergennes was able with just pride to say to the Duc de Choiseul : « War has been declared against Russia, as was the King's will, which I carried out fully, but I bring back the three millions. I did not require them ». When he left Constantinople, the French Chamber of Commerce of that city, wished to offer a magnificent present to M^me^ de Vergennes. The Ambassador forbid it. « I carry away with me », he said, « treasures more precious to my heart : your esteem and your regrets ». And when later on, some one expressed astonishment at his disinterestedness, he simply said : « When one has been honored by the confidence of the King, there is but one way of doing one's duty ; that is by serving him disinterestly ».

Of this service of the King's to which he was so faithfully attached, M. de Vergennes had a very high conception. Simple in his tastes and appearance, he professed the following maxim : « That an Ambassador may make himself ridiculous by his magnificence, but that magnificence never gave consideration to an insignificant man ». He knows what « decency » commands and what he owes to the dignity of the monarch he represents. His manner is calm, moderate, but firm. When he became Minister he stopped certain gossip of Lord Stormont, the English

Ambassador, by simply saying : « I am going to the Palace to receive the orders of the King, my master », in such a firm tone that he was requested to remain.

M. de Vergennes gave himself up entirely to the service of the King ; he worked daily, well into the night, reading and marking each document himself, and this went on until his death. The attack of gout which killed him found him, we may say, pen in hand. « When I shall no longer be able to do this I shall leave », he often said, « duty must pass before pleasure, such is my maxim ». He knew that excess of fatigue was bad for his health, for he wrote to M^me^ de Vergennes on August 30^th^ 1774, « Walking is good for me and regular exercise would be necessary, but I am not always at liberty to take it ». While he held office Vergennes hardly ever saw his family ; he ended by reserving one day a week, the Friday, which he devoted to them entirely ; but discouragement often followed, and though he mastered his lassitude by strength of will, yet he could not but admit it in writing to M^me^ de Vergennes. « My one desire would be to break this chain, which I never accepted as you know either by choice or pleasure ». This was dated October 8^th^ 1774 ; he had replaced the Duc d'Aiguillon at the Foreign Office but a few months before. He was not an ambitious man, nor an intriguer, and the heavy and important responsibilities incumbent upon him, were due neither to flattery nor to favor, but

solely to his own merit, personal talents and the esteem of Louis XVI.

A sense of duty, that is the dominant idea of his career, the whole life of Comte de Vergennes. Duty made him accept the position of Minister, duty inspired his silent zeal and the ardent activity which wore out his strength. He neglected the most natural, the most legitimate distractions, and « thinks nothing done so long as there is something to be done ». When asked how, with such preoccupations, he can enjoy a quiet slumber, he replies : « I only go to bed when I have put everything in order and my conscience is at ease ; besides there is nothing extraordinary in sound sleep, it is the privilege of workers ».

« I find », he tells his sons, « the value of such a costly sacrifice and the strength to maintain it, in reflecting that every citizen owes the tribute of his work to his country, and submission to the will of his master, — two principles which I beg you to lay to heart and make the rule of your lives when you have reached the age when you must adopt a plan of conduct... It is merit that must distinguish you from the common herd, and not honor ».

He also advises them : « One must not always say what one thinks ; but an honorable man must always think what he says ».

M. de Vergennes' sense of duty was due to his deep and firm Christian faith. During his last illness, almost at the supreme moment, a Minister of State wished to see him. Vergennes received

him with these words : « Monsieur, you see my condition ; one must always reach this point. A day comes when we must give an account of all our actions ». This was Vergennes' belief during the whole of his life ; and he never abandoned it ; and that is why he always went straight on, disdainful of calumny and sarcasm, which he was not spared ; and the King asking him one day : « Do you still take them to heart ? » he could answer with calm dignity : « Sir, they never reached that point ».

Such was the man who for the next thirteen years was to preside over the exterior relations of France. It will be easily understood by what precedes, *how essential is the study of the character of M. de Vergennes ; for his character explains his work*. At the accession of Louis XVI the situation in Europe was still feeling the consequences of the seven years war, which had ended in 1763. England ruled the seas, her Colonial Empire had greatly increased ; she had taken Canada, India and Senegal from France. The latter was concentrating herself, re-organizing her army, her navy, and making a close alliance with Spain, whose monarch, Charles III, was like Louis XV et Louis XVI, also a Bourbon. In Germany the political equilibrium had been displaced. A new power, fated to weigh heavily on the destinies of the Continent, had arisen : Prussia. The king, Frederick II, had been victorious in his struggle with Austria ; the Hohenzollerns triumphed over the Hapsburgs, and the

latter, full of rancour, only waited for an opportunity to take an ardently longed for revenge. In the East, under the influence of Catherine II, Russia was making formidable progress and threatened to destroy the barrier of weak States that surrounded her. In 1772 the Tsarina agreed with Prussia and Austria to make the first division of Poland.

Vergennes was wonderfully conversant with all the factors of European politics. Admirably assisted by collaborators, such as Gérard, Hennin, Gérard de Rayneval, he soon showed himself the rival of a Mazarin (1), or a Choiseul (2). On the 8th December 1774, in an eloquent report, he explained to his Sovereign the foundations on which he intended to construct his political system. This is a most important point. The principles laid down by Vergennes are, and will remain, a model of dignity, loyalty and diplomatic honesty. M. de Vergennes, as M. Albert Malet so judiciously remarks (3), « intended to be guided by abstract principles... completely disinterested... He would wish to substitute diplomatists to Generals, he dreamed of the end of wars, to be rendered impossible by arbitration ». « There is no reason », he said to

(1) The famous minister of Louis XIII after Richelieu death.

(2) The great diplomat of Louis XV.

(3) Malet (Albert). *A Minister of Foreign Affairs in the XVIII century, Comte de Vergennes* (1774 to 1787), in the *Revue Bleue* of 8th March 1890.

M. de Corberon, the French Ambassador in Russia, « why the Courts should not lay aside the old prejudices, which caused them to consider themselves in a state of disguised warfare, and by avoiding all that could bring about an offensive to alliances naturally pacific, by clear and amiable explanations on the subjects that might lead to quarrels they would avoid moments when it would be impossible for them to agree ». This seems really like the first and distant conception of what might be the « League of Nations », so much spoken of in our time.

Moreover, when we closely examine M. de Vergennes principles, a comparison naturally arises. In language — bearing in mind the difference of time — Louis XVI's Minister holds the same language as president Wilson. The analogy is unquestionably striking. Both are theorists of right; idealists, but practical idealists. Averse to war, for as Vergennes said : « If unscrupulous princes can gamble with provinces, one must never forget that men are the counters they use! » By force of circumstances, both are thoroughly engaged in a struggle in which the liberties of part of the human race depend. M. de Vergennes did not intervene in favor of the American « rebels » from motives that differ much from those which impelled M. Wilson to join the Allied powers — in order to preserve the world from the German domination. After an interval of more than a hundred years, Wilson and Vergennes became the conscious champions of the

same cause, that of justice. For M. de Vergennes declared to Louis XVI on December 8th 1774 : « The absolute disregard of justice and decency which characterizes the conduct of some of the contemporary powers, must cause serious thought and even necessitate precautionary measures in those States, which are inspired by more healthy maxims and do not put on the same footing the just and the unjust. Posterity will hardly believe what an indignant Europe now beholds : three powers actuated by different and opposite interests, uniting, and by reason of the strongest despoiling of its rich domains, an innocent country (Poland) only because of its weakness and inability to resist the cupidity of its invaders. If force is a right, if convenience is a title, where will henceforth lie the security of nations ? If possession that has existed from time immemorial, if solemn treaties... are no longer a check to ambition, what guarantee will there be against surprise and invasion ? If political robbery is perpetuated, peace will soon be nothing more than a career open to disloyalty and invasion ».

In this « defection from true principles » what should France do ? It was impossible, according to Vergennes, « that regardless of her most sacred obligations » she could remain in a sterile indifference. On the contrary, she must prepare, re-assemble all her resources to lend weight to her opinion in the world. « Nations are respected in proportion to their vigorous

resistance, and which not abusing of the superiority of their forces, insist only on what is just... peace and general tranquility ». This rôle of France Vergennes will lay down more clearly still in his statement on Americain affairs, read before the Council on 31st August 1776 : « From these principles of the King, his dearest aim is to base the glory of his reign on justice and peace, it is certain that if His Majesty seizes a unique opportunity, which centuries may probably never reproduce, to contain within reasonable bounds the dominating schemes of Great Britain, France would command peace for many a year and would only display her power for the rule of order and justice ».

Such a policy, after all, was not a mere dream ; the Minister worked for the good and grandeur of France in order to establish her influence in Europe, but the sine qua non of this influence was to be moral and disinterested. Vergennes distinctly said to Louis XVI, in a report of April 12th 1777 : « *France, constituted as she is, should fear aggrandizements much rather than seek them. The fame of conquering Kings is the scourge of humanity, while that of benevolent Kings is a benediction. This, Sire, should be the ambition of the King of France...* France, situated in the centre of Europe, has the right to influence all great measures. If Your Majesty directs His policy so as to establish in public opinion the fact that neither a longing for invasions, nor the least ambition touches His soul,

and that he only wishes order and justice, His decrees will be respected and His example will be more powerful than His armies. Justice and peace will reign over all. »

These words singularly display the reasons and extent of Vergennes' enterprises. And we have but recently heard President Wilson express in a different form an analagous thought, when in his message of April 3rd 1917, he said : « Let us clearly explain our aim, which is the defence of the principles of peace and justice against autocratic and selfish powers ». It is to the honour of ancient France that through the medium of one of her greatest Ministers, she was the first to proclaim her will that public right was to be the basis of all her foreign policy. This conception is exactly what induced Vergennes to declare himself in favor of the liberty of America. By a just requital and as history repeats itself, the same principles now lead the United States to arm for the liberation of the French soil.

After his accession to power, Vergennes attentively watched the development of the American revolution. The idea of aiding the colony certainly haunted his mind from the very beginning, but — and here again we have a similitude with President Wilson, — M. de Vergennes did not let himself go to his impressions, he reasoned them and only gave way when his convictions were definitely settled. « He pondered at length, pen in hand, over his conscientious me-

moirs, and appeared hesitating, incapable of quick decisions, of precise measures,.... but when he had weighed the pros and cons, thought over his decision, his answers were clear and he vigorously carried out what seemed to him the best (1) ». In the same manner we have seen President Wilson patiently examining the question, under all its aspects, scrupulously measuring the terms, before reaching the sincere and loyal decision from which he will never vary.

To safeguard the French forces, of which he was the guardian, Vergennes would only employ them with due foresight and for a serious result. An intervention in America appeared desirable only if it was to be efficacious and opportune. Above all, he wished to avoid a hasty and premature action, which might rouse the suspicion of some ambitious and mental reservations on the part of the King, and which might unite the adversaries before a common threat. Nothing could be wiser. It was necessary to wait till the 'rebels' had proved the stability of their action, its vitality and the assurance of finding a sufficient co-operation which would reduce to a minimum the chances of failure. This was the reason why, till the capitulation of Saratoga, M. de Vergennes confined himself to giving them secret help, through indirect agents, sending them information, weapons and munitions through the medium of Messrs, de Bonvouloir,

(1) Malet, *op. cit.*

de Beaumarchais and others. He was certainly disposed to act, but only at a favorable moment, when he held all the trump cards in his hand, when he felt convinced that the help of France might become truly useful and even decisive.

For this reason, and in spite of his own feelings, he strove to moderate the impatience of public opinion. The latter clamoured for an immediate intervention by the side of the Americans. In the streets, in the coffee houses, in drawing rooms and at Court, from one end of the Kingdom to the other, one heard nothing but of the justice of their cause and the heroism of their resistance. Already in the Spring of 1777 La Fayette had crossed the Atlantic. Franklin, who had landed at Auray towards the end of 1776, was the idol of the capital. On the 28th December Vergennes had officially received him. An Englishman, travelling at that time in France, remarked that (1) « from Dunkirk to Paris, passing by Brest, Bordeaux, Bayonne, Marseille, Toulouse, Lyon and Dijon, he had found everywhere, both men and women, cordially devoted to the American cause ». Vergennes shared this feeling, but all the responsibilities rested on him ; he held in his hands the destiny of a great country ; he intended to choose his hour, the propitious hour, and in so doing he fulfilled his duty. All the enthusiasm that aroused France

(1) *Memoirs on Franklin following up his private life*, published in 1790 in London.

would have been useless without the goodwill and decision of the Government. This decision Vergennes brought to the United States when he judged the moment due.

Vergennes, in fact, recognized all the resources of the enemy, its naval superiority and means of attack and defence. He wished that by virtue of the family covenant which united the Bourbons of Versailles and Madrid, Spain should enter the arena with France. His plan succeeded in spite of many difficulties. One must minutely scan his despatches to understand the amount of patient and tenacious talent it required to decide Charles III and his Minister Florida Blanca, and still more to reduce the exactions of their essentially realistic policy.

In the first days of 1778, this negociation had not yet been carried through, and yet there was no time to lose. « The moment has come when it is urgent that a resolution should be taken ; America must either be abandoned to her own resources, or be assisted with courage and efficacy. January or February 1778 is the moment, after which the two Courts will only be left with regrets for the lost opportunity ». Thus Vergennes spoke to Louis XVI on the 23rd July 1777, less than three months before the fall of Saratoga. Everything was ready, now was the time for action ; Vergennes felt this and wished it. The irresolution of the Madrid Cabinet still made him hesitate. It was then, and it is necessary to lay stress on a point too often igno-

red, that the King intervened. Of this personal action of Louis XVI we have the irrefutable testimony of Vergennes himself. In a letter of January 8th 1778, addressed to the Comte de Montmorin, the French Ambassador at Madrid, he relates his doubts and perplexities. There was not one member of the Cabinet who did not recoil from taking so responsible a decision « before being sure of Spain joining France ». « I have suffered myself more than anyone, » continues Vergennes, « and I am still very much affected, I may even say ill ; but His Majesty has given courage to us all ». Louis XVI proceeded with Vergennes to the house of M. de Maurepas, the Prime Minister, who, very old, and suffering from gout, kept his room. There the King examined the question minutely for the last time and « not influenced by his Ministers, but before the evidence of facts — before the certitude of peril, » he decided upon the alliance with the United States. On the 16th December 1777, Gérard, head clerk of Foreign Affairs and Secretary of the Conseil d'Etat, informed the American plenipotentiaries « that after long and mature deliberation on their affairs and propositions, His Majesty had determined not only to recognize their independence but to conclude with them a treaty of alliance and commerce ; that the King would not only do this but would sustain them to the uttermost of his power, though he would perhaps in so doing find himself involved in a costly war, but that he should

expect no compensation from them ». The alliance was signed on February 6th 1778. Spain joined in the following year.

On the 20th March 1778, at the Palace of Versailles, in the Salle de l'Œil-de-Bœuf, amid the dazzling crowd of courtiers and foreign ministers, a fine-looking old man could be seen advancing to the place occupied only the previous day by the English Ambassador ; with bald head and large spectacles he looked strikingly simple in his brown cloth attire, unpowdered hair and round hat under his arm. This was Franklin. « Monsieur », said Louis XVI in a most sincere and friendly tone, « I request you will assure the Congress of my friendship. I hope all this will be for the good of our two nations ». M. Franklin, bowing low, replied : « Your Majesty may count on the gratitude of the Congress and its faithful observance of the pledges it takes ». In the evening the American delegates were present at the Queen's play at which she had had a seat reserved for Franklin, and pressed on him the marks of the highest regard, which the charm of her beauty and natural grace rendered all the more precious (1).

The work of Vergennes was getting done. In putting to it the last touch he did not forget the rule of wise foresight of which he had always made a law unto himself. When the American

(1) Guichen (vicomte de). *Decline of the Bygone Form of Government : Franklin in Paris* (1776). Paris, 1909.

delegates had come to solicit his support, they had thought it necessary to lavish promises upon the Court of Versailles. One of them, Deane, had on the 16th March 1777 offered the assistance of the United States to recover Canada and had suggested a plan for the division of Newfoundland, but M. de Vergennes had not taken these hints. He would claim nothing but what was strictly equitable from the new allies of France. In so doing he had protected them from themselves, so as to have an imprescriptible right to their friendship, pledging them, as M. Doniol so aptly says (1), to an open pact to which all nations could subscribe. « The connection that war will establish between France and America », Vergennes assured Louis XVI, « will not be one of those passing contracts a momentary need creates and effaces ». An upright and straightforward policy, full of foresight, of which France at the present time reaps the benefit, in these days when President Wilson is realizing the prophecy of Comte de Vergennes. The Congress of the United States felt the value of this proceeding. In ratifying the alliance of 1778, its Committee of Foreign Affairs congratulated Vergennes in the following words : « We admire the wisdom and true greatness of France, as it is shown in the construction and ratification of the treaty you send us. It tends most efficaciously to destroy

(1) Doniol (M.). *History of the Participation of France in establishing in the United States of America a pact.*

the petty spirit which unfortunately has hitherto ruled mankind. In this treaty, policy is founded on philosophy, and the mutual sympathy that actuates the two nations is the basis of their common interests. France by her candour and frankness, has captivated and attached us more than any secret treaties could have done, and in the happy position we are in has laid the seeds of eternal friendship ».

As long as the War of Independence lasted, M. de Vergennes' diplomacy remained to the fore. He had much to do ; it was not enough to send gold and men to America, to despatch Rochambeau and his soldiers, Admiral de Grasse and his fleet ; it was necessary, once France was enlisted, to watch that nothing should turn her from her object. Vergennes saw to this. He particularly wished to limit the war to France and England. He knew by the experience of the Seven Years War, at what cost the monarchy had carried on hostilities simultaneously in Europe and on the Ocean, and that in reality it was on the German plains that England had conquered Canada. Obliged to bear almost the whole weight of the struggle against Frederick of Prussia's armies, France had been obliged to neglect her fleet and overseas possessions. Thus she had lost most of her colonies, which the English had comparatively easily annexed. It was most important that such a situation should not be repeated ; Vergennes did not lose sight of it. On the other hand, the St. James'Cabinet was

not inactive. It was England's interest that the conflagration should burst out again in Europe, in order to renew the alliance with Prussia that had been so useful to her fifteen years before. Now precisely, circumstances showed themselves peculiarly favorable to a European conflagration. The secret rivalry existing between Frederick of Prussia and Joseph II of Austria, the son of Marie-Thérèse, had reached an acute stage. On December 30th 1777, Maximilian III, Elector of Bavaria, had died, leaving as his sole heir a very distant cousin : Charles Theodore, Elector Palatine. Joseph II coveted the larger part of his inheritance, and made an agreement with the Palatine which was signed on 14th January 1778 at Munich. Prussia, alarmed at this aggrandizement of Austria, opposed the execution of the treaty. The conflict immediately assumed a very serious character, War seemed inevitable ; England urged it on, already hostilities were beginning when Vergennes saw the danger. France, bound by an alliance with Austria, would inevitably be forced into the fray ; her effort in America would at once be slackened, weakened, perhaps annihilated. Without losing a moment, the Minister of Louis XVI turned to Catherine II. Russia and France offered their mediation and made the belligerents accept the Treaty of Feschen (13th May 1779) which set a limit to the Emperor's ambition. Peace was maintained and England no longer found the Continental soldiers which might have changed

the result of the struggle, or at least would have turned her from her principal design.

In 1780, another diplomatic sucess of Vergennes definitively isolated Great Britain. Strong in her superior navy, England asserted her right of seizure of enemies' goods when carried on neutral ships, and also by a simple decree to impose the blockade of a port. At the instigation of France the Tsarina, in her celebrated declaration called « Armed Neutrality », adopted Vergennes' rules which established the foundations of modern maritime rigths. Russia, Denmark, Prussia, Sweden, Austria, Portugal, the two Sicilies and Holland, pledged themselves to respect these principles. It was a league of neutrals. It brought to France, Spain, and the United States a considerable moral support. Soon Holland, attacked in her colonies by England, also joined the alliance. Thus, with an activity ever on the alert, Vergennes maintained the European equilibrium, which allowed Rochambeau's battalions efficaciously to second the heroic struggle of Washington's soldiers for liberty.

When peace followed victory, Vergennes, with a delicacy of feeling that was justly appreciated, informed the plenipotentiaries that the « subject of America must be settled solely between the United States and Great Britain and not by France, who had no authority on that point ». This established both her disinterestedness in regard to these States and their quality of belli-

gerent nation. It was worthily ending a work undertaken for such noble motives, carried out so cleverly, with such tact and forethought. When at Versailles, M. de Vergennes, surrounded by the Ambassadors of England, Spain, Austria and Russia, presided, on September 3rd 1783, over the general pacification, he appeared as the Arbitrator in the centre of this kind of Congress, where all the great Powers, Prussia excepted, were represented. Having gained the esteem and even the confidence of loyal adversaries, such as Lord Shelburne, he verified the words of his collaborator, Hennin, who shows him « considering himself the King's Minister, entrusted with the happiness of the world, persuaded that his master only required wisdom and vigilance to occupy the first place amid sovereigns ! » « The Comte de Vergennes », he adds, « convinced all of his moderation, because it came from his heart and mind. He was believed because he was known as true... The lesser States looked up to him as their shield... A happy feeling of security reigned in the political world. One man had made the change ! On the 3rd September, the treaties were signed that put an end to the War of Independence. In Paris, on that morning Sir David Hartley, a member of the English Parliament, on one hand, and John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and John Jay, respectively Ministers of the United States in Holland, Versailles and Madrid, on the other hand, affixed their signatures to an act by which the Government of

Georges III recognized the independence of the thirteen States: New Hampshire, Massachusettss, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, South and North Carolinas and Georgia.

On the same day the Plenipotentiaries of the Great Powers assembled at Versailles, and with all the usual ceremonial signed a double treaty of peace : the first between Great Britain and France, the second between the former and Spain. Eleven personages in the « Salle de France » or « Salle des Traités » gathered round the large marble table of the foreign affairs, First : Vergennes assisted by his son, Vicomte de Vergennes, and M. de Rayneval, brother of the negociator of the Franco-American Alliance of 1778. Then came Comte d'Arauda, ambassador of Charles III of Spain, accompanied by the Chevalier de Heredia ; the Duke of Manchester, English Ambassador ; Comte de Mercy, Austrian Ambassador, and his secretary ; Prince Bariatinsky, Russian Ambassador, assisted by M. Arcadi de Markoff, Plenipotentiary Minister and his secretary. The representatives of Joseph II and Catherine II acted as mediators. In the evening M. de Vergennes gave a dinner of thirty-one guests to all these diplomats, to which he also invited the Ministers of the United States and those of Holland.

We have already mentioned that it was in the « Salle des Traités » at the « Hotel » of Foreign Affairs at Versailles, that the great deed of paci-

fication was signed on the 3rd of september 1783. This building, which had also in it the office of Naval Affairs, was built in 1761 to 1763 in the street of the Surintendance (now called rue Gambetta) by order of the duc de Choiseul, on the plans of Jean-Baptiste Berthier, father of the future Marshal of the Empire, who was justly renowned among his contemporaries. Five consecutive halls, of which the centre one, the largest, bore the name of « Salle de France » or of the « Treaties », formed the principal part and was kept for the Foreign Affairs department. Gilded, wired, low book-cases extending five hundred feet long, filled the sides. Large panels painted by Bachelier, lined the walls. Above the doors, decorated by admirable carved wainscotting of the XVIII century, canvases by van Blarenberghe, represented the different capitals of Europe.

All these decorations still exist in the same majestic and sober elegance. Intelligent care and great taste has restored its former aspect to the ancient Hotel des Affaires Etrangères (now become the Public Library of the town of Versailles) and more especially to the « Salle des Traités ». If foresooth, the crimson silk which lined the wire-guards of the bookcases has disappeared, a more magnificent and noble ornamentation takes its place, by the divers sumptuous masterpieces of French binding of the XVII and XVIII centuries carefully preserved in the Versailles Library which also inherited those of the King's, the

Queen's and the Princes' Libraries. On the chimney a clock, a marvellous piece of work of that time, commemorates the event of September the 3rd.

The numerous Americans who now have the opportunity of coming and seeing Versailles, will certainly visit the sumptuous setting in which one hundred and thirtyfive years ago, the independence of the United States received the solemn consecration of Europe, and they will avail themselves of the opportunity of giving, by the side of the justly eulogized names of La Fayette, Rochambeau and Admiral de Grasse, a legitimate remembrance to the name of Comte de Vergennes — the great Minister of Louis XVI, worthy heir of Richelieu, Mazarin and de Lionne — whose large share in this common cause, seems now somewhat forgotten.

In 1785, the Duc de Croy, a great friend of M. de Vergennes, having been to see him after dinner, complimented him on the cessation of hostilities between France, America and Great Britain. Alluding to certain ill-natured criticisms about the Minister, he said to him : « I do not answer for the honor you will derive from this peace at present, but I do answer for it in a hundred years ». M. de Vergennes reflected a moment, then he gravely replied : « I trust so, at least for that time ». It was not the exclamation of pride, but that of a serene conscience. And we must recall the words of this maker of American inde-

pendence now when the stars spangled banner appears (and more than ever in this victorious days) for the cause of Right and Liberty on the battlefields of Europe !

ANNOTATION

The direct issue of the great Minister having become extinct, his name is now borne by the descendants of his elder brother : Jean Gravier, Marquis de Vergennes, ambassador to Switzerland in 1775, to Portugal in 1777, to Venice in 1779 and again to Switzerland in 1784. The head of this branch is the present Marquis de Vergennes, whose son volunteered in 1914, was severely wounded and was awarded the Medaille militaire and the Croix de guerre, has nobly sustaining on the field of bettle, the hereditary traditions of honor and duty.

Autun. — Imprimerie Pernot.